

US eases dune access as piping plovers gain

By Scott Allen
GLOBE STAFF

Over the protest of environmental groups, the US Fish and Wildlife Service yesterday allowed Massachusetts to relax some protections for piping plovers, permitting more off-road vehicles and other human intrusions on beaches where the endangered birds nest.

Federal officials said the permit given to the state, the first of its kind in New England, will let beach managers balance the needs of plovers against human recreation and other interests in places where the birds are coming back strongly.

Federal officials conceded that the move is likely to result in the loss of 83 plover chicks a year, but they said the deaths would not reverse the tripling of the state's plover population since 1987.

"We are trying to be very cautious ... to err on the side of the birds," said Anne Hecht of the US Fish and Wildlife Service. But Hecht said the tiny plovers have recovered enough to begin experiments with relaxing the strict plover regulations.

But three environmental groups accused federal officials of bowing to pressure.

US Fish and Wildlife officials "are only doing this because of the off-road vehicle lobby and political pressure," said Jack Clarke, advocacy director for the Massachusetts Audubon Society. He said Audubon, the Conservation Law Foundation and the Sierra Club soon will try to block the policy.

The Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife requested a federal permit to relax plover rules after intensive management boosted the state's population from 126 nesting pairs in 1987 to 441 pairs last summer.

Under the new policy, Hecht said increased access to plover nesting areas will be tightly controlled. Vehicles will be escorted through plover areas by beach managers and won't be allowed to pass close to more than 10 percent of the nesting population on a beach.

Hecht said beaches where more vehicles and pedestrians are allowed will have to take steps to offset the damage, including installing fences to keep out foxes and other predators.

"We think the division's plan is biologically very sound. The division has an excellent track record for implementing its programs, and we'll see what comes of it," said Hecht.